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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000153

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/AWH AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PHUM KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: VETERAN DEMOCRACY DISSIDENTS SPEAK OUT ON U.S. HUMAN RIGHTS  
POLICY

REF: A) 08 HCMC 625 AND PREVIOUS B) 08 HANOI 617 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (U) This cable contains an action request. Please see paragraph 10.

12. (SBU) Summary: Veteran democracy activists Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV) leader Tran Khue and monk Thich Quang Do of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) offered divergent views on U.S. human rights policy, including the Secretary's recent trip to Asia, and described the issues facing their organizations in separate discussions with Poloff on February 26. While steadfast in their opposition and criticism of Communist Party rule, the three were more contemplative and mild in their rhetoric than in previous meetings, expressing more interest in U.S. developments than in the situation in Vietnam. All three are in good health, and despite the continual surveillance and interference they experience while under "virtual house arrest," were remarkably well-informed about current events and U.S. policy initiatives. Their analyses, however, tended to highlight their relative isolation, as well as a well-founded paranoia regarding GVN and Communist Party efforts to thwart activists' efforts to advance human rights and democracy in Vietnam. End summary.

Que and Khue Laud New U.S. Administration

13. (SBU) Dr. Nguyen Dan Que and Dr. Tran Khue were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the Secretary's recent visit to Asia and the direction of the new administration. In separate meetings at their homes, the two activists praised the President and the Secretary for their efforts to restore USG credibility and rebuild ties overseas, ushering in a "new era of change." Asked about the Secretary's visit to Beijing, Dr. Que did not focus on her human rights comments but instead registered his concern over growing U.S. - China cooperation, arguing that closer ties between the two would make it more difficult for Hanoi to balance its own relationships and grow economically. Dr. Que urged the USG to offer the GVN "economic carrots with advice on human rights and democracy" and to participate more actively in ASEAN, especially the newly-created human rights body. Que was also very complimentary regarding Ambassador Michalak's efforts to send more Vietnamese students to the United States, echoing Thich Quang Do's comments regarding the next generation being the agents of political change in Vietnam.

14. (SBU) Dr. Tran Khue, the leader of the Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV), proudly displayed copies of books authored by the Secretary and the President translated into Vietnamese, and at several points directly quoted passages from "The Audacity of Hope." He also gave Poloff several volumes of his own poetry and political essays to send to the President and the Secretary

in Washington D.C., along with the message "A 74-year old Vietnamese man truly holds them in high esteem." Like Dr. Que, he urged the USG to carefully balance its relationships with China and Vietnam and said that he felt Vietnamese people in Vietnam were much more supportive of growing ties between the United States and Vietnam than were the "extreme" anti-Communist Vietnamese community in the United States.

15. (SBU) Dr. Khue spent some time discussing various social issues with Poloff, including his concern over new regulations on press and blogs, the negative environmental and cultural impact that bauxite mining in the Central Highlands will have for ethnic minorities and the GVN's interference with rice pricing and exports in the Delta last year. Khue said that communication among DPV members has been difficult, but mentioned that he was visited by several groups of land rights protesters from nearby provinces shortly after Tet. Khue noted that when the protesters were asked by security police what Khue gave them during the meetings, they answered "hope and faith." (Comment: In our view, Khue's points reflect an excellent understanding of recent developments in Vietnam, including their causes and impacts. These are not simple issues -- as highlighted in our past reporting -- and have not been reported clearly in the official media, yet Khue was clearly very well informed. End Comment.)

Fiery UBCV Leader "Disappointed" by the Secretary's Speech

16. (SBU) In stark contrast to Que and Khue, Venerable Thich Quang Do, the 83 year old leader of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), was eager to register his disappointment over the Secretary's comments in Beijing, noting that GVN authorities may conclude that human rights issues are no longer a top priority for the Obama administration and thus become more "heavy-handed" in their treatment of political activists. Do said the CPV "needed to see obstacles" like the CPC designation in order to take human rights and religious

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freedom seriously. Poloff assured Do that human rights remains high on the USG agenda, noting that the Secretary raised human rights issues at all of her meetings with Asian leaders, including in China, and welcomed the creation of an ASEAN human rights body.

17. (SBU) When asked about the global economic downturn's effect on the economy and social stability in Vietnam, Thich Quang Do said that in authoritarian regimes like Vietnam, Burma and the DPRK, "leaders do not care whether the people starve," so if the Vietnamese economy collapses, it won't necessarily lead to regime change or mass demonstrations. He also noted that while the Vietnamese people needed to lead the fight for democratic change in Vietnam, Vietnamese citizens look to the United States and EU as "a source of spiritual assistance and hope" in order to "keep the fire of democracy burning."

UBCV's Four Great Misfortunes

18. (SBU) Thich Quang Do said the trials and tribulations the UBCV faced in organizing the former Patriarch's funeral in July 2008 represented the "fourth great misfortune" in UBCV's tumultuous post-1975 history (ref A). Do said then noted three other periods of "great misfortune": the imprisonment, persecution and assassination of UBCV monks from 1979-1999, the visits of Zen Master Thich Nhat Thanh of the Lang Mai Monastery in France and the 2008 Vesak Day celebrations (ref B). Do said that the GVN had used the 2005 and 2006 visits by Thanh, a world-renowned pacifist who has promoted reconciliation with the GVN, to urge the UBCV to register under the legal framework on religion. Thich Quang Do reiterated his view that by registering, the UBCV would acknowledge that they are currently an "illegitimate" organization in the eyes of the GVN even though the UBCV's legitimacy pre-dates that of the GVN. During the "third misfortune" of the Vesak Day celebrations, Do said the GVN approached UBCV leaders in Vietnam and abroad to try to persuade them to participate in the GVN-sponsored events and cut

their ties with UBCV in Vietnam. Do believes Thich Nhat Thanh and two other senior UBCV monks, Thich Tue Si and Thich Le Minh That (a former political prisoner who co-sponsored VBS participation in Vesak) are collaborating with GVN in an attempt to divide UBCV "from the inside," and fears the GVN is also placing "agent monks" in UBCV monasteries overseas.

¶9. (SBU) Thich Quang Do said that his communications and movements continue to be monitored closely and that organizing meetings with other UBCV leaders remains difficult. He urged Poloff to "harbor no illusions" regarding the GVN's progress on religious freedom, noting that as long as the CPV remains in power, UBCV will not be able to operate freely. Thich Quang Do did offer one bright bit of optimism--his belief that future generations will take up the UBCV's fight for justice and human rights. Remarking on Buddhists' belief in impermanence and change, Do said change within the Communist Party was inevitable and perhaps someday soon, the CPV will "change themselves out of existence."

#### ACTION REQUEST

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¶10. (SBU) ACTION REQUEST: As per his request, Post would like to forward Dr. Tran Khue's books and messages to POTUS and SecState. We propose accomplishing this by pouching them for EAP/MLS for appropriate action.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
FAIRFAX